Memorandum

To: Erin Aleman

From: CMAP staff

Date: September 29, 2023

Subject: Improving demand-responsive services

Executive summary

Demand-responsive and paratransit services provide critical connections for hundreds of thousands of residents in our region. Both ADA paratransit and local "dial-a-ride" programs play a key complementary role to fixed-route transportation, connecting older adults, people with disabilities, and other residents to economic opportunity, healthcare, friends, and family. However, these programs often face significant challenges around fragmented service, unreliability, and high operating costs relative to fixed-route transit.

Following COVID-19, ADA paratransit and dial-a-ride services have seen a stronger recovery in ridership than fixed-route transit. As the region's populations of older adults and people with disabilities are projected to continue to grow, more residents will come to rely on demand-responsive transportation, making the reliability of these services crucial to the future of the region's transportation system.

Despite substantial effort by providers and agencies in recent years, riders who relied on demand-responsive services still faced challenges even before COVID-19. Riders who rely on non-ADA demand-responsive services face a complicated patchwork of services, with different service hours, eligibility rules, and service areas that significantly constrains where and how residents can travel. And while Pace ADA paratransit meets or exceeds federal requirements,

ADA paratransit riders can still experience extended wait times and lengthy trips. The total costs of these demand-responsive services have also significantly grown in recent years, especially for ADA paratransit. It is important to note that these challenges, including for both the rider experience and cost growth, are related to increasing demand and national trends like labor cost inflation, rather than inefficiencies at Pace. However, given the shared funding sources for demand-responsive and fixed-route transit, cost growth has had impacts on the funds available for other regional transit services.

In the face of these and other challenges (such as staffing availability), Pace and local partners have recently undertaken a range of measures to improve demand-responsive services, from establishing countywide service offerings to expanding programs that subsidize rideshare trips for ADA paratransit users. Building on these initiatives, this memo outlines various recommendations to improve the demand-responsive transportation system to better serve residents across the region.

Recommendations include:

- Supporting ongoing efforts to improve options for ADA paratransit users by providing greater state funding for regional paratransit (see companion PART memo on paratransit funding, available on the [PART webpage](#))
- Expanding available transportation options for ADA paratransit-eligible residents and further coordinating and integrating local dial-a-ride programs
- Establishing uniform eligibility and a unified registration system for dial-a-ride services
- Strengthening regional demand-responsive service coordination and governance

The challenge: Riders rely on a complex patchwork of demand-responsive services to meet mobility needs

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) mandated that public transit service providers provide paratransit service within three-quarters of a mile of fixed route bus and rail transit (excluding commuter rail) during the same service hours at no more than twice the fixed route fare. In addition to ADA paratransit, there are a range of other demand-responsive services serving the region. Across the suburbs, various "dial-a-ride" programs at the municipality, township, and county levels provide coordinated demand-responsive rides for seniors, residents with disabilities, and/or other residents who need access to non-car travel options. These providers may have restricted service areas, specific eligibility requirements, and unique, often-narrow hours. These services connect tens of thousands of residents and visitors to opportunities throughout the region.

Residents across northeastern Illinois rely on demand-responsive services to live their daily lives but face a complicated patchwork of programs with varying service limitations and reliability. Across the region, most demand-responsive trips are federally required ADA paratransit service provided by Pace on behalf of the region's transit providers. Pace and other providers have

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made significant progress over the past three decades to build and operate a complex system to meet the complex mobility needs of people with disabilities.[1] This system, including ADA paratransit services, meets or exceeds federal performance standards. Yet, disability support organizations report that ADA paratransit service in the region still has areas where it could improve.[2] Even in a system that exceeds its statutory requirements, riders can still face lengthy trips, extended wait times, and complicated transfers. As discussed below, many suburban residents who would be eligible for and use ADA paratransit live outside the service area for these programs or live in areas where ADA paratransit coverage is limited in its hours of operation. Traditional ADA paratransit service also must be booked a day ahead of the trip, making it harder for riders to enjoy complete mobility.

There are also challenges for non-ADA demand-responsive services. The lack of coordination among providers limits and complicates the trips residents can take. Service areas frequently end at arbitrary jurisdictional boundaries and with limited connections, forcing riders to change plans, make additional transfers, or forgo travel. Additionally, riders may struggle to know what offerings are available to them and what they need to do to book a ride, in part because each provider has different eligibility requirements and hours (often limited to weekday mornings and early afternoons, in some cases ending as early as 3:00 p.m.).

Adaptive modes of transit are an important solution in an aging and changing region. The median age of northeastern Illinois is rising as the region's population over age 65 continues to grow. Additionally, advances in medicine and technology are giving people with disability more choice in where to live and how to participate in community life. Illinois saw a 1.4 percentage point increase in the share of residents who have a disability between 2011 and 2021 — or more than 150,000 additional Illinoisans who may come to rely on demand-responsive services.[3] Older adults use demand-responsive services at a higher rate and drive at a lower rate than the rest of the population.[4]

Demand-responsive services are a critical if costly component of a regional transportation system that ensures mobility for all residents. Given limited resources, improvements to ADA paratransit and dial-a-ride services must be coordinated with other steps to achieve and maintain full accessibility of fixed-route bus and rail transit throughout the region. Despite functioning as distinct services, the successes of both fixed route and demand-responsive transit are intertwined. Better accommodations like wheelchair accessible bus stops and train station elevators, as well as technology-enabled wayfinding, can make transit a reliable, daily option for many who otherwise would rely on ADA paratransit or dial-a-ride. These shifts can free up capacity to more effectively serve those who need more assistance.[5] Efforts to improve accessibility should be accompanied by robust travel training efforts, such as those recommended by RTA's 2021 Coordinated Human Services Transportation Program (HSTP), that help riders develop the skills and confidence they need to successfully use different forms of public transportation.[6]

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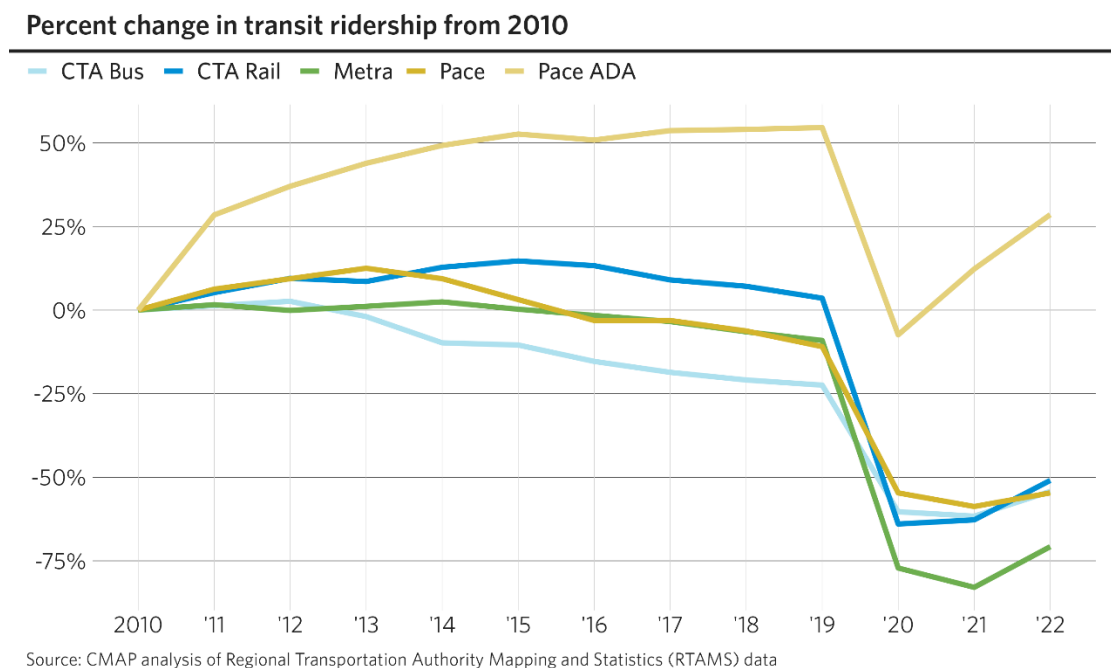
Regional context

Pace ADA Paratransit

Following the passage of the ADA, CTA and Pace began providing paratransit service in their respective service areas. In 2006, Pace took over ADA paratransit provision in Chicago from the CTA, becoming the ADA paratransit service provider for the entire Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) service area.[7] In 2022, Pace provided an average of 220,000 ADA paratransit trips each month, for a total of more than 2.5 million annual trips.[8]

Pace also assumed responsibility for the Taxi Access Program (TAP), a partnership with local taxi companies that gives Chicago residents who are certified for ADA paratransit the added flexibility to use taxis without booking trips in advance. Riders pay a fare of $2, and Pace subsidizes the remainder of the fare up to $30. In 2022, riders used TAP to make over 900,000 trips, or 25 percent of regional ADA paratransit ridership.[9] Averaging $25 per trip, TAP trips come at a significantly lower cost to Pace than traditional mini-bus paratransit trips, which cost Pace $69 on average in Chicago.[10] Pace and DuPage County launched a comparable program, the DuPage Access Program, with Uber in 2022 that has seen similar cost-per-trip reductions.

As with fixed route transit, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on Pace's ADA paratransit service and ridership, creating significant challenges around staffing and the safe provision of service.[11] However, compared to CTA, Pace bus, and Metra, ADA paratransit experienced the smallest decline in ridership and has shown the strongest recovery relative to pre-COVID-19 ridership levels (Figure 1).[12] These trends suggest riders with disabilities have few alternatives but to rely on ADA paratransit to make necessary daily trips, particularly if they have conditions that would weaken or complicate their body's response to the disease.

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Figure 1. Pace ADA paratransit has seen a stronger post-COVID-19 recovery than fixed-route services.

Percent change in transit ridership from 2010

Source: CMAP analysis of Regional Transportation Authority Mapping and Statistics (RTAMS) data

Despite recent improvements to regional ADA paratransit, many riders still feel the system's shortcomings. For example, even when the system meets or exceeds federal performance standards, riders may face extended wait times when being picked up. The federal ADA standard defines "on time" as within 30 minutes of the scheduled pickup time. Prior to the pandemic, Pace went above these standards and maintained an on-time performance window of 20 minutes in Chicago and 15 minutes in the suburbs, a standard which it met in 95 percent or more of trips in 2020.[13] Pace has since altered its on-time performance requirement to match the federal 30-minute window.[14]

Additionally, many suburban residents who would be eligible for and use ADA paratransit live outside the service area for these programs or live in areas where ADA paratransit coverage is limited in its hours of operation. ADA paratransit coverage mirrors available fixed-route transit services provided by CTA and Pace. As shown in Figure 2 below, that does not include the entire region, or even the entirety of Cook County. As the region considers changes to existing transit coverage, the interaction with paratransit coverage is also critical. Any reductions in service could mean fewer areas where ADA paratransit coverage would be required to be maintained. Conversely, if the region were to invest in new transit services at new times or in new places, that would also need to be accompanied by complementary investments in expanded ADA paratransit coverage – providing additional service, but also requiring additional resources to support operating costs.

The challenges faced by Pace ADA paratransit, such as rising costs and increased wait times, are not unique to the CMAP region or to Pace. Demand-responsive services in any form are expensive to provide. Many of the most common critiques of existing service are also linked to efforts to manage and minimize cost growth. And paratransit service providers across the

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country face similar problems. Any reforms must consider and address a variety of unique factors that make the provision of quality service difficult and costly given funding constraints and the fragmented nature of demand-responsive service governance. Steps to address paratransit costs and on-time performance are likely to involve significant trade-offs, so potential adjustments to the paratransit system should be considered carefully.

> *The challenges faced by Pace ADA paratransit, such as rising costs and increased wait times, are not unique to the CMAP region or to Pace.*

Pace has continued to make incremental adjustments to serve the needs of both the agency and ADA paratransit riders, with the aim of providing more reliable and efficient service. For example, in 2008, Pace implemented a computerized reservation and scheduling system for Chicago ADA paratransit service. This built on the computerized system which was already in use for suburban ADA paratransit service. Between 2014 and 2018, Pace established a dedicated contractor for trips over 15 miles, centralized trip distribution by eliminating service zones within Cook County, and began adding contracted taxi services for greater capacity.[15] In 2020, Pace established the Paratransit TripCheck platform, which allows riders to review upcoming trips, cancel trips, and receive alerts for ADA paratransit and Pace-operated dial-a-ride service.

In August 2023, the Pace Board approved $321 million to fund contracts with rideshare providers for subsidized trips for ADA paratransit riders over the next 10 years through a new Rideshare Access Program (RAP). This program is set to build on the success of the DuPage Access Program and will be available to all ADA paratransit riders in the region. Pace projects a potential $155 million in savings over the next ten years through diversion of traditional ADA paratransit trips to RAP trips. The program is also set up so that non-ADA dial-a-ride programs can opt-in to provide similar rideshare subsidies.[16]

In their presentation of the program to the board, Pace staff recognized challenges associated with ensuring adequate supply of wheelchair accessible rideshare vehicles and stated that the program would be implemented in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. This may be a particularly acute challenge in exurban and rural areas with smaller rideshare and taxi fleets, impacting not only on local trips but also return trips for journeys from elsewhere in the region (e.g., Chicago) where WAV penetration is higher. Additionally, partnerships with private firms such as Uber or taxi companies present challenges to ensuring the longevity of service. Lyft recently announced the company is ending its provision of shared rides where drivers pick up multiple riders at a time, highlighting the potential for abrupt changes to how these firms operate that may affect paratransit consumer choice programs.[17]

Despite these challenges, in moving to expand these subsidies to all paratransit riders, Pace has taken a major step to provide more options to paratransit users while reducing operating expenses that have increased significantly over the past 15 years. These costs have begun to

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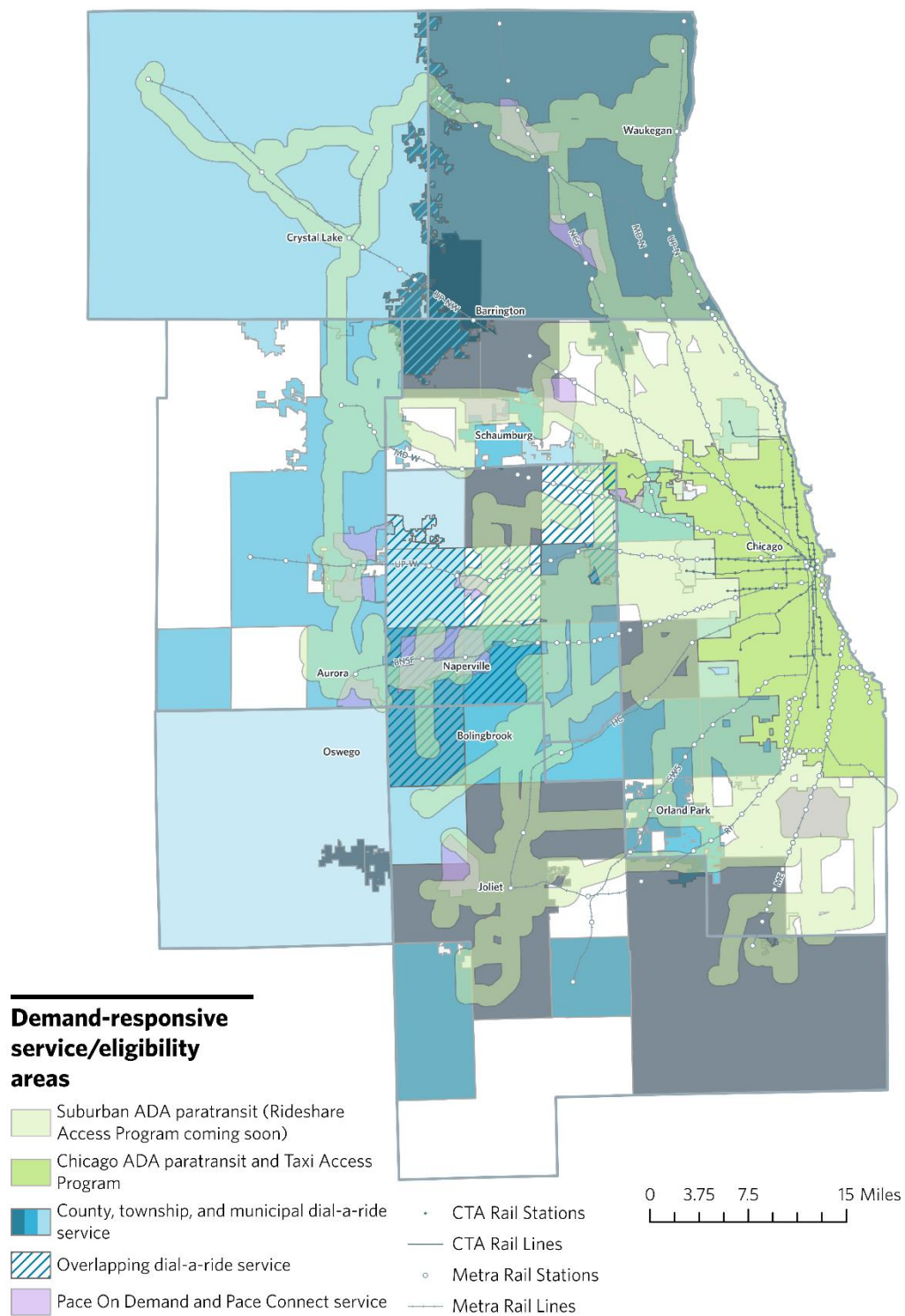Chicago Metropolitan
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constrain funding for other priorities such as fixed route transit. RAP also has the potential to relieve capacity constraints related to staffing. As Pace ADA paratransit, like other transit providers, continues to struggle to maintain adequate staffing levels, taxi/TNC subsidy programs can effectively expand capacity.

Additional details on the importance of full state funding for paratransit are available in the companion PART appendix memo. Find the latest version on the [PART webpage](#).

Demand-responsive services beyond ADA paratransit

In addition to federally mandated ADA paratransit, demand-responsive transportation is also provided by a range of counties, municipalities, townships, and non-profit community organizations. Most programs serve specific populations such as older adults, people with disabilities, and/or low-income residents. Since these programs are not federally mandated, they vary widely in structure and the service they provide. Many jurisdictions contract with Pace to provide dial-a-ride services with funding from the Federal Transit Administration's Section 5310 Enhanced Mobility of Seniors & Individuals with Disabilities program. In 2022, Pace provided more than 474,000 dial-a-ride trips through its programs with local jurisdictions.[18]

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Figure 2. Northeastern Illinois has a patchwork of demand-responsive transit service areas.

Demand-responsive service/eligibility areas

- Suburban ADA paratransit (Rideshare Access Program coming soon)
- Chicago ADA paratransit and Taxi Access Program
- County, township, and municipal dial-a-ride service
- Overlapping dial-a-ride service
- Pace On Demand and Pace Connect service

- · CTA Rail Stations
- —— CTA Rail Lines
- ○ Metra Rail Stations
- —— Metra Rail Lines

0   3.75   7.5   15 Miles

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Looking forward, northeastern Illinois is expected to see increased growth in older populations in either areas without dial-a-ride services or those served by disconnected providers. While Cook County currently has a higher proportion of senior residents than the rest of the region, census data shows that the over 65 population has been growing fastest in the outer suburbs over the last ten years.[19] The same trend is reflected in CMAP's socioeconomic forecast for the next 30 years, shown in Figure 3 below.

Many of the areas with growing populations of older adults, such as McHenry, Kane, Kendall, and Will Counties, are also served by less fixed route transit than Chicago and the inner suburbs. This makes ensuring reliable demand-responsive services — whether ADA paratransit or county-level dial-a-ride — critical in effectively serving the mobility needs of these communities, alongside efforts to expand and/or alter ADA-accessible fixed route service.

Figure 3. The region's average age will rise significantly in coming decades.
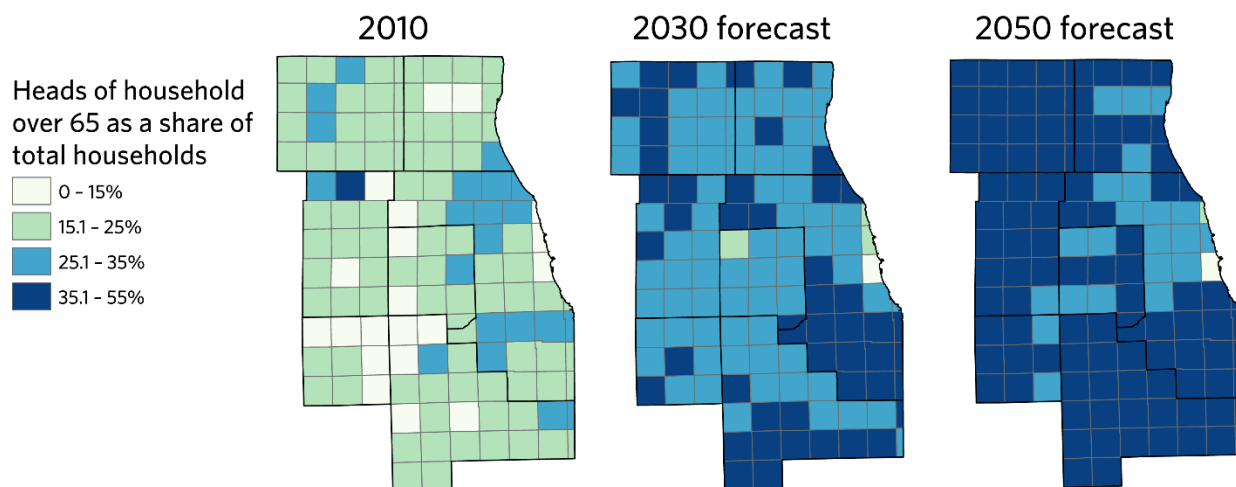
Source: CMAP Socioeconomic Forecast, ON TO 2050 Plan Update (2022)

Over the past decade, some counties have taken steps to address the problems associated with a local patchwork approach to dial-a-ride by coordinating services at the county level. For example, in 2012, McHenry County began coordinating and subsidizing trips between Crystal Lake, Woodstock, and McHenry, three of the county's largest municipalities. This program followed a successful two-year pilot effort, and over the following years the county continued to expand its MCRide program. In 2021, MCRide expanded service to the entire county, allowing residents from anywhere in McHenry County to book rides across the county. After a similar process of gradually coordinating and expanding dial-a-ride programs, in 2022 Lake County established Ride Lake County, a single service for seniors and people with disabilities to travel across the entire county. The net operating cost to the county for this program is around $1.1 million annually. For more details on these programs, see Appendix A.[20]

Other counties have also made progress toward these goals of more seamless and integrated travel. For example, Kane County's Ride in Kane program, first launched in 2008, continues to expand and now serves 15 sponsoring townships and municipalities with certain trips for low-

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income residents, seniors, and people with disabilities regardless of where they live in the county. DuPage County's Ride DuPage program, first launched in 2004, serves residents of six municipalities and four townships and provides medical trips for seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income residents for the entire county.

Pace also operates demand-responsive services that serve specific communities and localized mobility needs. For example, Pace On Demand is a reservation-based shared-ride service that is open to the public and operates in ten different suburban service areas including Round Lake, Aurora, and Joliet.[21] In June 2023, Pace also launched Pace Connect, which provides late-night on-demand service in south suburban Harvey and the southern O'Hare business area. Third shift workers in these two employment centers can now book rideshare trips for a $2 fare to or from the Harvey Transportation Center and the Rosemont CTA Blue Line station. The Pace Connect service is fully wheelchair accessible and accepts Ventra, as well as credit or debit cards.[22]

Peer examples

While demand responsive services in other regions face many of the same challenges as in northeastern Illinois, northeastern Illinois can learn from how other service providers operate. In the Boston area, paratransit-eligible riders can use rideshare companies like Uber and Lyft for subsidized trips through the MBTA's The RIDE Flex program. In addition to lowering the operating costs per trip, the program has saved riders thousands of hours of waiting/travel time, although there have at times been challenges regarding the availability of wheelchair-accessible vehicles.[23] In Denmark, a unified software system handles trip requests and assigns rides among more than 500 providers for both ADA-type trips and broader service for the general public.[24] In the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, a single dial-a-ride service is provided to the seven county region. To improve information access around transportation options, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation operates a single website where users can enter their information and find services available to them across 12 counties. For information about these examples, see Appendix A.

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Existing regional resources

Transit providers and advocacy organizations have done extensive work analyzing the region's system of demand-responsive services and outlining strategies for improvement. In February 2021, IBI Group and the RTA published an ADA Paratransit Innovation Study - Action Plan. This plan provides context on the state of paratransit service and details specific innovations to improve the system's effectiveness and financial sustainability. In March 2021, the RTA also published an updated Coordinated Public Transit Human Services Transportation Plan (HSTP). This document provides an inventory for existing transportation resources, an assessment of unmet needs and barriers to mobility, and goals and strategies for improving mobility options for older adults, people with disabilities, and people with low incomes.[25] The Metropolitan Planning Council's (MPC) December 2019 "Toward Universal Mobility" report also makes clear recommendations. These resources, among others, have been key resources in the shaping of this memo and the following recommendations.

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Support ongoing efforts to improve options for ADA paratransit users

As Pace adapts to rising costs and staffing challenges amid growing paratransit ridership, the State of Illinois should take action to support efforts to improve service for ADA paratransit riders. With the recent approval ten years of funding for the Rideshare Access Program and other ongoing efforts to implement recommendations from the February 2021 ADA Paratransit Action Plan, such as the use of non-dedicated vehicles, Pace has shown a commitment to improving paratransit operations across the region. These efforts to maintain and improve service for both users of traditional paratransit and rideshare/taxi subsidy programs will require significant long-term investment.

Considering the importance of paratransit to the region's transportation system, the State of Illinois should commit to fully funding paratransit operations. This new funding would entail at least $220 million annually, plus increases connected to labor and inflation costs. This funding should be structured to ensure that Pace has the resources necessary to make new options available to paratransit users (e.g., TAP and RAP) and bolster the traditional system without straining other funding priorities.

Additional details are available in the companion PART appendix memo on paratransit funding. Find the latest version on the PART webpage.

Recommendation 2: Integrate dial-a-ride services into larger geographies (e.g., county-level zones)

Dial-a-ride service in the region needs to be more consistent, efficient, and useful for a wider range of trips. Pace, county departments of transportation, mobility management staff, and dial-a-ride service providers should take steps to integrate existing services and expand offerings to serve larger geographies at expanded hours. Coordination and integration of services is highlighted as a key goal in the RTA's March 2021 Human Services Transportation Plan (HSTP) and would reduce arbitrary service gaps as well as limits on where and when riders can travel. The HSTP also recommends the extension of demand-responsive operations to early morning and nighttime hours.[26]

The state should accelerate the integration of dial-a-ride services by matching county funding dedicated to dial-a-ride service coordination, integration, and expansion. The state can also play a key role by requiring that all jurisdictions collaborate in good faith through the process of dial-a-ride integration. These improvements can make an especially significant impact in rural and low-income areas that experience longer, more costly trips to service centers.

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Implementers should leverage regional lessons. In addition to collaborating with local stakeholders, officials in Will, DuPage, Kane, and suburban Cook counties (which lack single, coordinated services) should work with their counterparts in McHenry and Lake counties to better understand the challenges and costs of establishing a county-level dial-a-ride option. Greater service integration will also make it easier for riders to understand how to navigate the system available to them. Pace's recent partnership with the Transit mobile app, which will soon include Pace On Demand in trip planning and real-time tracking, is a positive step towards more integrated and user-friendly service.[27] Pace and county-level providers should continue to collaborate on the barriers to inter-county paratransit and explore possibilities for service coordination across local boundaries.

The coordination of dial-a-ride services at the county or even regional level will potentially require significant structural changes to how these services are administered, such as the further consolidation of demand-responsive service oversight and governance within existing agencies (e.g., Pace) or any new governance approach. As regional stakeholders consider broader changes to regional transit governance, the place and ideal structure of demand-responsive service governance should be carefully considered alongside that of fixed route transit.

Implementation steps

- Obtain IDOT Statewide Planning and Research funding to conduct research and planning around how best to serve mobility needs through further-coordinated dial-a-ride. Lake County's 2019 transportation market study,[28] which helped lead to the establishment of countywide service, provides a model for the type of study that could support similar processes in other counties.
- Develop and implement state funding program to match county-level funding for dial-a-ride integration and expansion.
- Implementation will vary based on the current status of county-level service and the unique opportunities and limitations that exist in each county.
- Establishing buy-in from county boards is critical to successful county-level service integration. Lake and McHenry counties both committed to contributing enough funding to provide county-level service without the need to convince each jurisdiction in the county to opt-in to dial-a-ride service.

Challenges

- Demand-responsive services rely on a high-cost operating model, and cannot substitute for the relative efficiency of fixed-route transit services at scale. Any investments in improved demand-responsive services must be accompanied by broader investments to improve the accessibility and reliability of fixed route transit services.
- Integrating municipal and township-sponsored services into a single county-wide service will require certain jurisdictions to allow the reallocation of funding they receive for dial-a-ride to support county-level service. However, as was largely the case in Lake County,

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jurisdictions may be content to fold their unique subsidies into county-wide service considering the improved service to their residents and the shifting of administrative duties to the county.

- Operating costs for dial-a-ride services, much like ADA paratransit, have increased statewide over the last decade and have increased dramatically since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This creates an ongoing challenge of fiscal sustainability for counties and other providers of dial-a-ride service.

Evaluation[a]

Policy

Category	Rating	Rationale
Mobility	High	Reduces arbitrary jurisdictional limits to trips, allows riders to reach more places more easily.
Equity	High	Allows older adults, people with disabilities, and others not served by fixed route transit to travel further distances to reach healthcare, employment, and recreation.
Environment	Medium	Unlikely to significantly affect transportation-related emissions; additional trips may be induced if demand-responsive services are more easily accessible to travelers with limited mobility.
Economy	Medium	May allow users to access wider range of job opportunities and local businesses, but unlikely to have significant impact given relatively low ridership of demand-responsive services.
Regional benefit	Suburban	Applicable in suburban jurisdictions throughout the region, building on existing programs in Lake and McHenry counties.

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[a] To evaluate different recommendations, CMAP developed a rubric for both policy impact and process difficulty. Policy evaluations are ranked from low to high. "High" means the recommendation would lead to significant improvements in the policy outcome (e.g., greater mobility or additional access to economic opportunities); "Medium" means the recommendation would have a neutral or minimal impact (e.g., no significant impact on transit ridership); and "Low" means the recommendation would worsen policy outcomes (e.g., having a disproportionate impact on low-income communities). For the "Regional benefit" category, the options are "Urban," "Suburban," and "Regional," designating where benefits are concentrated. For all process evaluation categories except timing, the scale ranges from "Low" (difficult) to "High" (easy or relatively straightforward). For "Timing," the options are "Near" (implementation could happen between now and 2026), "Medium" (implementation could occur between 2026 and 2028), and "Long" (implementation would likely be beyond 2028).

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Process

Category	Rating	Rationale
Administrative feasibility	High	Lake and McHenry counties have already established county-wide dial-a-ride service, demonstrating the feasibility and replicability elsewhere. However, implementation will require coordination across many jurisdictions and the integration of existing systems and processes.
Political feasibility	High	Implementation will require significant coordination between counties, municipalities, and townships that receive funding to provide service.
Timing	Medium	The establishment of county-wide service in Lake and McHenry counties took more than 8 years in each case. However, Kane and DuPage counties have both made major strides towards expanding county-wide programs and are in a solid position to further expand service quickly.
State span of control	Medium	The state currently has a limited role in non-ADA dial-a-ride service in northeastern Illinois but could provide matching funds to counties that pursue service coordination and require jurisdictions to collaborate as services are coordinated and expanded.

Net cost / investment

Both Ride Lake County and MCRide required investment of additional funds to enable unified eligibility and broader service areas. Integration may create cost savings through economies of scale, but unlikely to significantly reduce operational costs. In 2022, McHenry County's MCRide averaged $37 total cost-per-ride while Ride DuPage, a smaller program, averaged $41 cost-per-ride. A state match could entail ~$1-5 million annually.

The operating cost implication estimates below could include investments by the state and/or local governments. Incremental capital investments may also be required depending on vehicle needs.

Category	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Operations & Maintenance	$1-5M	$1-5M	$1-5M	$1-5M	$1-5M	$1-5M
Capital	<$1M	<$1M	NA	NA	NA	NA

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Recommendation 3: Establish uniform eligibility and a unified registration system for dial-a-ride services

Due to the current fragmented system of demand-responsive services in the region, the process for finding information about available options and registering for dial-a-ride programs is complicated and unintuitive. Pace and RTA should take steps to improve information discovery and availability through a centralized website and mobile app where riders can enter their address, age, and disability status to determine what offerings are available to them and how to use them. Public agencies should also collaborate to create uniform eligibility guidelines for riders in a way that expands eligible groups and types of trips allowed. According to the RTA Human Services Transportation Plan, multiple providers cited client and trip eligibility restrictions as significant barriers to mobility.[29] A unified enrollment and eligibility system would also allow for a streamlined dial-a-ride fare and payment system. State funding could help to offset any costs related to unifying eligibility thresholds, especially if operators wanted to maintain access for all currently eligible riders across the various services.

The development of this resource (as recommended in the Metropolitan Planning Council's Toward Universal Mobility report) should include information on community service organizations in addition to Pace-operated programs, so riders know the full range of options.[30] Implementing Recommendation 2 by further integrating dial-a-ride services will make a centralized, user-friendly resource easier for the region's transit providers to establish and for users to navigate. McHenry County and Pace developed a streamlined eligibility and registration process through their call center. Other providers should take similar steps to make administrative processes easier for both riders and providers.

This information could also be better coordinated with other community support organizations like 2-1-1 call centers that help individuals locate social services available to them. The state's 2-1-1- Collaboration Board is an existing body already set up to coordinate county-led information and referral programs that connect residents to local resources and service agencies. Over the short- to medium-term, information and intake for dial-a-ride programs could be incorporated into 2-1-1 services more quickly and at a lower cost than building a new resource from scratch. For both the integration of demand-responsive services into the 2-1-1 system and the development of a resource more connected to regional transportation information system, the state should require that all relevant jurisdictions and service providers collaborate in good faith to improve the rider experience.

Eventually, a dial-a-ride information system could be incorporated into a regional trip planning resource, such as Pace's growing partnership with the Transit mobile app, with clear information on both fixed route and demand-responsive transportation, as well as comprehensive and up-to-date accessibility information like elevator status, bus stop accessibility, etc.

Additional recommendations on transit system accessibility are available in a complementary memo, available on the PART webpage.

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Implementation steps

- Determine specific shortcomings of the current system for finding information about and determining eligibility for dial-a-ride services in the region.
- Determine lead agency to develop and host streamlined resource for dial-a-ride services (e.g., Pace)
  - Explore statewide 2-1-1 program as an existing channel that would allow for improved information availability and user-friendliness around non-ADA paratransit programs.
  - Engage/re-invigorate the state's 2-1-1 Collaboration Board to explore potential alignment.
- Develop, test, and deploy user-friendly online eligibility resource, where riders can find demand-responsive services available to them by entering their address, age, and disability status.
- Collaborate with service providers to incorporate registration for local dial-a-ride programs and reduced fares for demand-responsive services.
- Explore possibility of incorporating trip-booking.
- Work with the RTA and service boards to better incorporate ADA paratransit and other demand-responsive services into regional trip planning resources.
- Promote resource to relevant populations such as older adults, people with disabilities, and residents of areas with little or no fixed route transportation.

Challenges

- Incorporating more advanced features, such as rider registration and/or trip booking, into this resource will require a significant degree of coordination with existing service providers.
- These features will also require more advanced development on the backend to allow for interaction with each service provider's rider database and trip scheduling software.

Evaluation

Policy

Category	Rating	Rationale
Mobility	Medium	Simplifies the process of finding and using demand-responsive services.
Equity	High	An integrated eligibility and application system would make it less burdensome for residents who rely on demand-responsive services to enjoy daily mobility. Web-based solution would need to be designed for universal accessibility, and any implementation should make alternate options available.

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Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

	Rating	Rationale
Environment	Medium	Unlikely to have significant environmental impact.
Economy	Medium	Unlikely to have significant impact on job access.
Regional benefit	Regional	Increases regional understanding and usability of demand-responsive services.

Process

Category	Rating	Rationale
Administrative feasibility	Medium/High	Improving information-sharing between government providers does not require extensive administrative coordination, but community service providers may prove more difficult to incorporate. Incorporating registration will require significant coordination with a range of service providers.
Political feasibility	Medium	Would require coordination across a number of appointed and elected officials, some of whom may be resistant to centralization.
Timing	Medium	Resource for determining eligibility for services could be developed relatively quickly; incorporating registration and trip planning will require a longer planning and coordination process.
State span of control	Medium	While Pace would be the most likely steward of this resource, IDOT could play a role similar to that of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation as the host/coordinator of a semi-statewide demand-response information resource. The state can also require jurisdictions and service providers to participate in the development of this resource.

Net cost / investment

There would be some cost implications related to the initial coordination and development of a unified system, although any system could leverage the significant efforts and investment in coordination already made by Pace in recent years (e.g., the unified system for demand-responsive services in McHenry County). Initial development costs will depend on the extent of integration with trip planning and booking. It is also important to note that more ambitious

DRAFT FOR REVIEW AND DELIBERATION

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

programs, such as adopting a unified fare payment system, would require significantly higher capital costs and ongoing operating costs.

Category	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Operations & Maintenance	Staff time for ongoing upkeep and operation					
Capital	$0.5M - $4M	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Recommendation 4: Strengthen regional demand-responsive service coordination and governance

Regional coordination and governance of non-ADA demand-responsive services is currently inadequate to the challenges faced by the fragmented system of services.[31] The RTA and Pace should explore options for regional and local staff to implement a strong regional approach towards non-ADA demand-responsive services. While the RTA Transit Access Citizens' Advisory Board (RTACAB) meets quarterly and addresses some related issues, the board has a broad scope that focuses primarily on enhancement to fixed route accessibility and ADA paratransit. There is no formal forum for regional coordination and planning of non-ADA services, although county officials sometimes meet on an ad hoc basis to share local challenges and successes.

Stronger coordination between jurisdictions and service providers will allow for concerted regional action to improve these critical services. As RTACAB plans to expand its scope beyond demand responsive services, this may be best accomplished by establishing a new body for mobility managers and other staff to collaborate.[32] With a formal structure set up to advance regional mobility goals, transit agencies and service providers will be able to more quickly and efficiently implement the recommendations outlined in this memo and elsewhere, as in the RTA's Human Services Transportation Plan. The development of more robust coordination will have significant governance implications and should be carefully considered as broader plans for restructuring regional transit governance are developed, assessed, and implemented. Overall, a stronger regional approach will also allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how fixed route and demand-responsive service as well as inter-county dial-a-ride service can most effectively complement each other.

DRAFT FOR REVIEW AND DELIBERATION

Chicago Metropolitan
Agency for Planning

Implementation steps

- Identify and engage key stakeholders such as riders, county departments of transportation, jurisdictions that sponsor large dial-a-ride services, and Pace mobility management staff.
- Obtain IDOT State Planning and Research funding—which prioritizes projects that involve multiple jurisdictions and can be used for consideration of projects and strategies that enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system—to explore optimal ways to improve regional governance.[33]
  - Explore advantages and disadvantages of potential avenues for stronger regional coordination such as RTACAB or a new council/board.
  - Determine scope and aims of further non-ADA demand response coordination.
- Identify funding source for strengthened coordination and new body (estimated costs listed below).
- Establish official body for regional coordination of demand-responsive services through RTA or Pace, adapting scope and aims as necessary.

Challenges

- Facilitating greater regional coordination will involve balancing the unique and sometimes conflicting considerations of a range of service providers and stakeholders.
- With a range of advisory bodies that already exist across the RTA and service boards, the case for a new avenue for regional coordination with limited power may be difficult to make to regional and local officials already involved in many committees, boards, etc.

Evaluation

Policy

Category	Rating	Rationale
Mobility	Medium	Will not make immediate improvements to mobility, but in the long term will facilitate improvements to regional mobility.
Equity	High	Elevates challenges faced by residents that are currently not served well or at all by existing transportation services in the region.
Environment	Medium	Unlikely to have significant environmental impact.

DRAFT FOR REVIEW AND DELIBERATION Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

Economy	Medium	Unlikely to have immediate impact on economic growth. In the long term, a better-coordinated system of demand-responsive transit will connect more residents to more jobs.
Regional benefit	Regional	Facilitates coordination between currently disconnected service providers to improve inter-jurisdictional and regional mobility for vulnerable populations.

Process

Category	Rating	Rationale
Administrative feasibility	High	Scope and structure of coordinating body will require input from a large group of service providers.
Political feasibility	Medium	Greater regional coordination will require a careful balancing of regional goals and local political realities.
Timing	Medium	Will require extensive stakeholder engagement and coordination with RTA and Pace.
State span of control	Low	The state currently has limited to no role in non-ADA demand-responsive service in the region. However, through Section 5311 funding, the state provides funding for dial-a-ride service in Kendall County and outside the region.

Net cost / investment

Unlikely to require significant new financial investments, although shifts in demand-responsive service governance could involve additional staff responsibilities.

Category	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Operations & Maintenance			<$1M annually (staff time)			
Capital			NA			

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Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

Appendix A: Regional and peer benchmarks

MCRide – McHenry County, IL

After beginning to pilot dial-a-ride service between three municipalities in 2010, McHenry County established the MCRide program in 2012. Since then, the county has continued to add municipalities and townships to its service area. In January 2021, the county program, MCRide, expanded to serve the entire county. With a lack of fixed route bus and rail service in the county relative to counties like DuPage and Lake, demand-responsive service is especially critical to serving transportation needs in McHenry County. The MCRide program currently serves around 7,000 riders a month. The service is open to all residents, with reduced fares for seniors and people with disabilities. MCRide also provides daily service until 11pm, including weekend service. The service provides trips to certain key destinations outside the county, such as Metra stations and nearby hospitals as well. In FY23, McHenry County allocated $1,800,000 in county funding for MCRide which covers 50 percent of the operating deficit, the other half of which is covered by Pace. However, the county receives Section 5310 funding through the RTA and is reimbursed around 40 percent up to two years later, leaving the county with a net annual operating cost of around $1.1 million. This is not all new funding, as the county had been funding dial-a-ride service prior to establishing countywide service, and due to declines in ridership since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, MCRide was providing fewer trips annually in 2022 than it did in 2015.[34]

Ride Lake County – Lake County, IL

After years of planning and two pilot programs, in May 2022 Lake County consolidated several programs to establish Ride Lake County, a county-wide dial-a-ride service like that of McHenry County. This program serves residents over 60 years of age and people with disabilities. It also serves the entirety of the municipalities that cross into neighboring counties. As of January 2022, the program was serving around 3,000 riders a month. Between 2021 and 2023, Lake County's share of operating costs for dial-a-ride increased by $442,000, or 180 percent, but over the same time period, the county saw an increase in ridership of just under 400 percent.[35]

FindMyRidePA – Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

What began as an effort to provide streamlined information to veterans in Pennsylvania about the transportation services available to them has since evolved into a state-level resource that allows Pennsylvanians to easily find information about demand-responsive and fixed route service. FindMyRidePA is run by PennDOT and allows riders to enter their information to determine services they are eligible for, register for various programs, and apply for reduced fares. Some service providers even allow riders to book trips directly through the site. The site

DRAFT FOR REVIEW AND DELIBERATION

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

currently provides information on services in 12 counties, with plans to expand to additional counties.

The RIDE Flex – MBTA, Boston metropolitan area

Beginning in 2016, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) began a pilot partnership called The RIDE Flex with Uber and Lyft to improve options for users of its The RIDE paratransit service and reduce operating costs. In 2017, the pilot program was expanded to cover all paratransit eligible riders. The partnership has been successful, saving riders hundreds of thousands of hours in trip time and providing same-day travel options and increased flexibility for riders. The pilot program found that even with a 31 percent increase in total trips, the Flex program still created a net operational savings for the MBTA due to significantly lower cost per trip.[36] Since the beginning of the program, MBTA has created a system where riders are allocated a certain number of trips based on their travel habits to limit major induced demand for trips.

There have been critiques of the program, including a lack of available wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs). Following a federal investigation, the U.S. Attorney's Office found that wheelchair users could not benefit from The Ride in the same way other users could. The investigation was resolved through a policy that incentivizes rideshare companies to increase the number of WAVs available for hire. The MBTA has agreed to monitor wait times for riders needing WAVs and to report the findings to the U.S. Attorney's Office.[37]

FlexDanmark – Denmark

A single software system handles demand-responsive trip requests and assignments for the entire nation of Denmark, coordinating trips across 550 service providers. FlexDanmark handles both ADA-paratransit-style service, as well as broader, dial-a-ride-type service. By coordinating service at such a high level, FlexDanmark can achieve increased trip efficiency and higher optimization of paratransit vehicles. [38] While ADA paratransit service and dial-a-ride service in northeastern Illinois largely use a single software, Trapeze, for trip assignments and routing, the level of coordination and efficiency achieved by FlexDanmark is not currently possible due to the lack of coordination between regional dial-a-ride services.

TransitLink – Minneapolis & St. Paul, MN

In the Twin Cities metropolitan area, the Metropolitan Council, the local MPO, provides a single dial-a-ride service, TransitLink, to the public across a seven-county region. Residents who do not live near fixed route transit can call a single phone number to book trips as short as two hours before they want to schedule a ride. While this demonstrates significantly greater integration than in many other U.S. examples, the program does have limitations, including a restriction to travel only on weekdays. While costs of service have increased significantly since the onset of COVID-19, in 2019 TransitLink provided public demand-responsive service at an

DRAFT FOR REVIEW AND DELIBERATION Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

average of $29 gross cost per ride,[39] while in 2019, locally comparable services Ride in Kane and Ride DuPage provided service at averages of $34 and $29 respectively,[40] illustrating the potential fiscal feasibility of providing demand-responsive services across broader geographies.

DRAFT FOR REVIEW AND DELIBERATION

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